THE THEOTOKOS AS A MYSTICAL THEOLOGIAN

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> "Share your wealth abundantly with me, O Lady, and if we cannot contain it, enlarge our capacity and then lavish it upon us. For you alone did not receive by measure, as all things were given into your hands".
> —St. Gregory Palamas, *On the Entry into the Holy of Holies of Our Exceedingly Pure Lady Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary and Her Divine Manner of Life There.*

In his account of "the last flowering of Byzantine Orthodoxy," Jaroslav Pelikan characterised it as the advent of "the mystic as new theologian." In more precise terms, this refers to the convergence of a heightened development of hesychasm between the 11th and 14th centuries and the composition of the *Triads in Defence of the Holy Hesychasts* by St. Gregory Palamas in the face of Barlaam of Calabria's damning criticism of a spiritual practice with deep roots in Orthodox Tradition (Pelikan 1974, 262). There is both an immediate and a more distant context for St. Gregory's articulation of a new theology in conjunction with the life of prayer. The more immediate guide in that direction was Simeon the New Theologian, who emphasised the primacy of personal experiences of God and His divine light, i.e., communion with the Incommunicable One that is granted through the Incarnation who delivers from sin and grants divine life. The theme of the divine light in relation to the Transfiguration will also play an important role in St.Gregory Palamas' mystical theology, as will his development of the ancient distinction between (unknowable) divine essence and the uncreated energies permeating all things. In relation to the wider tradition, Pelikan further writes, "The novelty of Palamite theology consisted in the fundamental reinterpretation of emphases going back to Origen and Dionysius the Areopagite; despite a continuing reverence for Dionysius, this issued in a 'new theology', for it brought about a further development in the Eastern doctrine of God" (Pelikan 1974, 262).

However, this development of which Pelikan speaks principally on the basis of the *Triads* gains a further and significantly contemporary dimension, when read in conjunction with St. Gregory's sermons on the Mother of God. In these sermons, the Virgin Mary manifestly appears as the model of the mystical theologian, in accordance with the patristic and, therefore, Orthodox meaning of the word, *theologia*. But, in the process of presenting the case for the *Theotokos'* singular place in the lives of the hesychasts, a philosophical issue, raised famously by Spinoza, emerges: "What can the body do?" This is a question, to the extent that it relates to an ontology of power, that is, at least implicitly, pervasive throughout contemporary philosophical thinking. Like Nietzsche after him, power is not what I want but what I have, a differentiable quantity that distinguishes my body, my power, from other existent beings. Significantly, Palamas' thinking confronts Spinoza's question precisely at the point where it mattered most to the Jewish philosopher: the capacity of the human body for God. Spinoza would say, for example, in proposition 39 of the Fifth Part of his *Ethics*: "He who possesses a body fit for many things possesses a mind of which the greater part is eternal" (Spinoza 2001, 252). Spinoza's naturalistic and intellectualist account of the possibility for beatitude, the unique substance that it presupposes, stands in stark contrast with St. Gregory's notion of knowing God, namely, a knowledge gained through participation in Christ's consubstantial bond with the Creator God. Indeed, the promise contained in the relational, self-donating ontology of action that underlies St. Gregory's thinking is a powerful one, and what it offers owes much to his intimate understanding of and relationship with the *Theotokos.* As the Mother of Christ/ God, she represents the primary example of a human creature's union with God through the practice of prayer. St. Gregory will thus, argue strongly at once for the place that the Virgin Mary has in the full appreciation of the Christian faith and for the particular insight that *theosis* gives in the structure of the real, namely the primacy within creation of human affiliation with the living God.

The true drama of Western thought is not – *pace* Heidegger – the forgetting of the question of being, but rather the forgetting of the question concerning the participation in Absolute Life as sons of God. Or to use, Michel Henry's expression: our being sons in the Son. This, in essence, is the ontological issue that I should like to point toward mainly (but not exclusively) on the basis of St. Gregory's sermons on the Mother of God: hers is the Son in whom we are sons; His Mother, our Mother. Her body is capable of God; ours is meant to be as well. When seen in this light, both Spinoza's question and Heidegger's quest to overcome ontological forgetting can be set on a quite different course.

As is well known, the complicity that prayer has with theology received its early formulation by Evagrius, who proposed in 61st chapter of his treatise *On Prayer: One Hundred and Fifty-Three Texts*: "If you are a theologian, you will pray truly. And if you pray truly, you are a theologian".[1] The theo-logian is to be taken literally as the one who is immersed in the Word (*Logos*) who is God (*Theos*), and can say so from personal experience, for he has, in truth and by grace, attained spiritual knowledge, or *gnosis,* through it. Otherwise said, *theologia*, inseparable from prayer and practiced "truly," is attained in the strictest sense of the word: the vision of divine glory that is reserved for the age to come but made available to the saints in the present life as well. In the subsequent development of the monastic tradition, the intellectualist character of Evagrius' doctrine of prayer was challenged by an older wisdom concerning the deifying experience of God, one closer in time to the first generations of Christians.

Late in the second century, Irenaeus of Lyon seems to have set the measure for Christian spirituality by advancing his famous dictum: "If the Word is made man, it is that men might become gods." The spiritual knowledge attained in theology, to the extent it denotes a loving relationship with the living God, cannot but have the reality of the Incarnation at its very centre. It is thus that Evagrius' teachings that accentuate the perpetual prayer of the mind will be assimilated and transformed into a prayer focused on the Person of Jesus Christ, the Word Incarnate, the true standard for Christian thinking and the rule for hesychasm. In the words of John Meyendorff "the 'intellectualist prayer' of Evagrius became in the East the 'prayer of the heart', a personal prayer explicitly addressed to the Incarnate Word, the 'Jesus Prayer' in which the 'recollection of the Name' holds essential place (Meyendorf 1974, 25).

In view of St Gregory Palamas' *Sermons dedicated to the Mother of God*, Meyendorff's formulation of the mystical theologian's communion with the Person of Christ and the utter intimacy that it implies is particularly helpful. They reveal, to begin with, that, for him, the Virgin Mary exemplifies to the highest degree the mystical theologian who has a uniquely personal knowledge of the Word and, even as a creature, actually

[1] The number of one hundred and fifty-three refers that great catch of fish brought in by the apostles upon being instructed by the risen Christ to cast their nets to the right of where they were in the boat. Hitherto, they had caught nothing. (cf., John 21:6-11) The suggestion is that Evagrius has likewise obeyed the Lord and has acquired wisdom in his doctrine of prayer that he now shares with his reader(s). In addition, the fact that the net did not break under the weight can be thought to mean the wholeness of his doctrine of prayer.

mirrors the reality of her divine Son. In conformity with "an eternal law in heaven," as St. Gregory formulates it, "the lesser shall share by means of the greater in what lies beyond" the Mother of God is the summit and full expression of all things holy that can be known in creation (Palamas 2009, 439). He sees her role as mediating the old carnal Israel and the new spiritual one, the Church, i.e., the created natural and the uncreated supernatural. "She alone was shown to be the natural mother of God in a supernatural way" (Palamas 2009, 417). The creaturely mirror of the Most High, she herself mediates in conjunction with the divine Mediator, who came into creation through her. Again, in accordance with that "eternal law in heaven" while we aspire to the holiness that she expresses to a greater degree, she herself has the root of her holiness in her greater Son that she mirrors and transmits to us. For Palamas: "She alone forms the boundary between the created and uncreated nature, and no one can come to God except through her and the mediator born of her, and none of God's gifts can be bestowed on angels or men through her" (Palamas 2009, 431).

What is striking in Gregory's understanding of *The Theotokos* is how she bypassed the stages of *praktiki* (the practice of the virtues, or purification) and of *physiki* (the contemplation of God in nature, or illumination) and moved directly into *theologia* (the contemplation of God Himself, or glorification). As such, the Mother of God is the foremost mystical theologian that embodies and precedes all others in excellence. Her privileged access to the knowledge of God is more than noetic, for knowing God also is to have loving communion with Him and to pray that all creation be restored and glorified in Him. In this she *is* the true theologian who prays truly. And, for this, she was carefully prepared in God's providence. Nevertheless, her election required her free consent in faith and obedience to live as one who is elect in consonance with the truth of her existence, namely, to magnify the divine presence throughout creation.

In his second sermon on her "Entry into the Holy of Holies," St. Gregory advances a peculiar account of the creation story that finds a place for the *Theotokos*. As he conceives the story, God created living things, but only man among them was distinguished by the fact that he had a mind. As a consequence of his specific difference in regard to all else made by God, man alone, "if he wishes," can seek to become God and have his "humble body" exalted in the process. Indeed it was for man that God created all things, but "as the human race progressed, there was no one able to contain God, as the situation demanded" (Palamas 2009, 416). The need of mankind for God was great and so He willed to bring into creation someone "capable of holding the fullness of the Godhead bodily

and …. to bring Him to birth and to form for all men, before and after her time, ties of kinship with God" (Palamas 2009, 416). In other words, the unique spiritual constitution of human being, i.e., the fact of being created *imago Dei*, implied a yearning for a corporal existence able to conform to the self-donating supernatural presence that abides in man.

For His part, God yearns to deify that very existence and to be in communion with His human creation. For this, in His divine Providence, He brings forth a human mediator worthy to bear His divine reality and to deliver into the course of history His Incarnate Word. It will be an expression at once of His infinite love for man and His will to restore his capacity to relate to Him, i.e., to restore man to his original state of affiliation with God the Father. "Standing between God and every race of men, she made God the Son of man, and men the sons of God" (Palamas 2009, 417). In effect, through the Virgin Mary, God inaugurates a second creation: if the first day of the first creation was that of light to be diffused throughout all that was made, in the second creation we have a pre-ordaining of a human dwelling-place for the one through whom all was made and who will be as a lamp-stand for the divine light newly given for the salvation of man. Just as the material with which lamp filters the light that is produced with it, it is through the materiality of the Virgin that those who seek communion with God may approach His light and truly know Him, "those who long for the outpouring of light and the granting of indescribable divine graces which come through her" (*ibid*). Those who abide in the light, participating thus in the divine energies, and undergo a transformation and become light themselves, reflecting thus the uncreated radiance of God, as in the Taboric light and the Transfiguration of Christ.

Nobility in accordance with nature and the flesh is one thing; nobility by God's grace is quite another. The notion of literally being high born through grace is thematically central throughout St. Gregory's meditations on the Mother of God. It will also say a great deal about the monastic vocation and the way to divine adoption, about those who are pure of heart and are able to discern that which comes from God. "The Virgin … has a soul synonymous with everything good and truly noble, which she guards in a perfectly pure body and which appears from without to those who see as we do, but is known from within to the discerning spirit of prophecy" (Palamas 2009, 432).

In his sermon "On the Nativity of the Mother of God" and the first one dedicated to the Virgin's entry into the Holy of Holies, Palamas centres much of his attention on the special kind of noble lineage of which she is the culminating figure: since a tree is known by its fruit and since the Virgin Mary is good beyond compare, then the "tree" that bore her would

also have its roots in the living God, who is goodness itself. This goodness, having the character of holiness, is most immediately situated in the persons of Mary's own parents, Joachim and Anna. Descendants of David, they were childless into old age, but, due to their devotedness to the Lord and in consonance with a pattern well established in Hebrew Scripture, they were granted the special blessing of parenting a child who will be decisive in God's plan of salvation.

In describing Joachim and Anna as being "superior in virtue" and having "nobility of character," Palamas draws on the *Protoevangelium of James* to bring to the fore their spiritual worthiness as parents of the Mother of God. Here again, the intent is to bring into focus the eternal law of heaven, operative and namely in relation to the virtues associated with the sanctity sought after in the monastic context (chastity, ascetical practices, prayer). Palamas presents his idea in a daring conceit, by which the virginity that Mary would eventually exemplify stands as a reflection of that of God the Father:

> So those without children were preferred to those with many, that the Daughter with all virtues might be born of highly virtuous parents, the All-pure of those who were exceedingly chaste, and that chastity, conceiving through prayer and asceticism, might, as a consequence, become the mother of virginity, virginity which would bring forth without corruption the divinity begotten of the virgin Father before all ages (Palamas 2009, 336).

It is, however, in the first sermon "On the Entry into the Holy of Holies," that we find a more explicit presentation of "the starting-point of God's election" of the Virgin's preparation to receive the Incarnate Word and to become the new Eve for humankind. Indeed, the line stemming from the first couple has to be reconstituted and given a new consistency. Once again, the new humanity that will come forth by, in and through the Virgin's divine Son will possess those qualities that will appear in the Mother of God and is cultivated in the monastic life. These will serve as criteria for all followers of Christ who wish to attain *theologia*.

In following the descending genealogy that Luke provides for Jesus, Palamas locates the point from which God will reinitiate the restoration of creation in the birth of the "excellent" Seth. Now, Seth is distinguished by "his orderly conduct, his control over his senses and his magnificent virtue," i.e., his dispassion (*apatheia*) and watchfulness (*nepsis*)" (Palamas 2009, 410). However badly matters provisionally turned (cf. Genesis 6), Seth, who was God's compensation to Adam and Eve for the loss of Abel,

is a type of Christ's Resurrection, for he overcomes the violent way of Cain.[2] But whilst Christ will raise up Adam, Seth did not do the same for Abel. Nevertheless in anticipation of those things that will happen through Mary, a son was born to Seth, Enos, who hoped in the Lord and called upon Him. Thus, situated in the line of Seth's descendents, "worthy, in hope, of divine adoption," and in accordance with God's foreknowledge, God's providential grace saw to it that the hope of Israel will progress discretely through the king and prophet David unto Joachim and Anna: "They were childless, but lived chastely together and were more virtuous than all those who traced back their noble descent and character to David" (Palamas 2009, 411). Pre-ordained in God's plan to restore creation and, thus, a gift from God even before she was born, she was received by Joachim and Anna as a gift in answer to their prayers for a child. But they would make of Mary a gift in return, i.e., a gift of the gift, for she was given over to the Temple at three years of age, shortly after being weaned.

Always interweaving the narrative details of the *Protoevangelium* with implicit references to the high calling to the monastic life and hesychast spirituality, Palamas underscores Mary's preference for the Temple and to its High Priest *in lieu* of her parents and the distracting joys of the natural world. Indeed, he comments that her exemplariness is such that she can be noted to be the first and only person who willingly forsake the world - for the sake of the world - from an infant age and to dedicate herself entirely to unceasing prayer, turning within herself, dwelling in holy quietness, and in "our life's upper room". It is, again, as if the child Mary passed immediately into *theologia*, into having a direct knowledge of God without any concern of acquiring that purity of heart that would enable her to contemplate the presence of the Creator in the order of nature: "The Virgin … could not turn her eyes upon any of these natural wonders (she was not old enough), yet she understood God, and rejoiced as she was brought to Him" (Palamas 2009, 426-427). If this distinguishes the Virgin from all those elected by God throughout the ages, she also serves as pointing to a divine knowledge that is beyond that contemplated in philosophy and the recourse to analogical reasoning. With some parallel to one of the themes that provoked the controversy he had with Barlaam, Palamas grants that first philosophy, which seeks to discern universal principles, even a first principle, free from the contingency of matter, has some merit, but it still ignores a higher, mystical vision of God, one that transcends mere discursive speculation. "Saying something about God is

[2] "The name Seth can be interpreted to mean 'resurrection', or, 'a rising up from', which actually refers to the Lord, Who promises and gives everlasting life to those who believe in Him" (*ibid*, p. 411).

not the same as encountering God" (Palamas 2009, 437). For our purposes, we acknowledge that the Mother of God enjoyed such an encounter of the most immediate kind; her purity made her a perfect human vehicle for the Incarnate Word, whom she will know as such; and her knowledge of God takes the form of a living communion. In the example of the Virgin, "… we attain to that unknowing which lies beyond knowledge, that is to say, above every kind of much-vaunted philosophy, even though the purpose of the most excellent part of philosophy is knowledge" (Palamas 2009, 437).

The Virgin's entry into the Holy of Holies, into the innermost sanctuary, the place where God is encountered, is conjoined with the paradox that she herself becomes the antitype of the temporal Holy of Holies as conceived by Israel. Everything about her is magnified, because the God who makes His abode in her also makes her the Holy of Holies in whom humankind might find her motherly comfort and protection. In order to describe the nature of this intimacy between Mother and Son, Palamas advances a striking image in regard to the Virgin's conception of the Son of God by the Holy Spirit: "There was nothing between the One overshadowing and the one overshadowed, not air, either earthly or heavenly, nor anything perceptible or beyond our perception" (Palamas 2009, 434). And precisely because there is nothing between the Holy Spirit and the Virgin, what takes shape in the womb of the Virgin is the Word of God that is being communicated by the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father. She is called Mother of God, because she contains God in her human body. We have seen how God fashioned her through is providential grace; now she fashions God in a human form and flesh that will be physically present for men to see and touch the immaterial reality of the Son in His bodily matter.

In explicating the divine reality being magnified in the Virgin Mary, Palamas conceives of God establishing her as "an icon of everything good" an expression of such beauty on display for both the angels in heaven and mankind on earth, that both dimensions of reality are thereby enhanced. The model for the theologian who prays truly, the Virgin sought God in the inner sanctuary, the spiritual Holy of Holies, having freed herself from the seduction of the exterior world. Thinking in terms of the hesychast method of prayer, Palamas proposes that she "united her mind with its inclination to turn within itself, with attention and unceasing holy prayer" (Palamas 2009, 441). Otherwise put, the mind is guided into the heart that directs the entire organism and, through unceasing prayer, allows grace to gain possession of the heart. Grace (or the uncreated energies) reigns over all thoughts and members of the body; subject to the Spirit, a power is recalled from within the purified heart becoming itself a dwelling

(Ark, Tabernacle, etc..) of God, who is at once circumscribed and magnified in it.

St. Gregory's poetic and spiritual exploration of the *Protoevangelium,* attributed to St. James, in regard to the Virgin's entry into the Temple from a very early age clearly means to situate the hesychast vocation within the parameters of her own union with her divine Son. Her body was made capable for receiving and being deified by God. Over against Barlaam's objections concerning this kind of knowledge in the bodily life of man, St. Gregory argues that this is precisely the aim of the hesychast method of prayer: the transformation of the body by uncreated grace. From the *Triads*, we read: "...those who have elevated their souls with divine longing, their flesh also is being transformed and elevated, participating together with the soul in the divine communion, and becoming itself a dwelling and possession of God; for it is no longer the seat of enmity towards God, and no longer possesses desires contrary to the Spirit" (Palamas 1983, I,ii,9).

What is persistently at issue in St. Gregory's advocacy of hesychast spirituality is the full reality of the Incarnation.[3] From this point of view, we can understand his preference in proposing the Virgin Mary as a model of mystical ascent in lieu of figures like Moses, who is honoured but whose spiritual knowledge cannot match hers. "She ran towards God with unrestrained love and persevered on her own in the inner sanctuary, as though continuously ministering to God in an indescribable way. Nothing of the sort ever happened to Moses" Palamas 2009, 426). In the continuation of this passage, St. Gregory assigns to Moses the role of prefiguring the Mother of God: "... after turning his attention to virtue and struggling to acquire it, and after going up the mountain to God, [Moses] was deemed worthy to be initiated into the signs prefiguring the Virgin, and ceaselessly assisted in the preparation for her". As Meyendorff sees it, this comparison is remarkable for it brings out the way St. Gregory takes a different path than the one established by Origen, namely, one that sees Moses ascending the mountain as the pattern of spiritual growth in Christ. To have put Mary in that role is truly remarkable. In following the Virgin in her total self-giving to God, even unto consenting to be His Mother, the

[3] The true dimension of St. Gregory Palamas's theological efforts is nicely stated by John Meyendorff: "For it was the Christian faith itself, and not just one form of spirituality, which he felt himself to be defending in his *Triads in Defence of the Hesychasts"* Meyendorf: 1964, 134). Meyendorff will go on to emphasise the theme of the Incarnation at the centre of St. Gregory's responses to Barlaam on the subject of the body. Barlaam's position is, according to Meyendorff, based on a Platonic underestimation of the importance of the body in knowing spiritual reality.

hesychasts practice their spirituality as a way to attain the sanctifying and deifying grace given in the Incarnation, an event that altered substantially our knowledge of God, an event and reality made possible by the Mother of God. In relation particularly to the flesh, the Virgin' s bearing of the divine Christ gives to it a potential for transformation and eternal life. The human body becomes intimately identified with the site from where Christ is acting from within His creation in order to redeem it and raise humankind into a deified state.

Following the tradition established by Macarius, St. Gregory maintains that our rational, incorporeal power is conjoined to us in the controlling organ of the heart. Here, the inner quiet attained by the hesychasts is fruitful in sounding the depths of the experience to the extent that in *hesychia* they "gather together the mind and enclose it in the body, especially in that 'body' most interior to the body, which we call the heart" (Palamas 1983, I.ii.3). In noteworthy consonance with what Michel Henry has tried to communicate to contemporary philosophers, according to St. Gregory, it is "the greatest of Hellenic errors" to have encouraged the mind to go "out of the body itself with the aim of contemplating intellectual visions" (Palamas 1983, I.ii..4); this has only led to heresy and folly – like that manifested by Barlaam. Rather the mind is to be recollected within the body and within the dynamics of its own self-transcending activity. This properly spiritual activity acquires a momentum of its own, i.e., it does not derive causally from the body. Generating its own power, it penetrates "the body from the mind, in order to transform the body into something better and to deify it by these actions and passions" that are common to both body and soul (Palamas 1983, II.ii.5).

The yearning struggle for the divine bears with it the purification of the faculties belonging to the whole of human being, body and soul; it is man in his entirety that receives the grace of deification and shares the divine light. Indeed, the attaining of theology, i.e., the experience of contemplating God, made possible by a "spiritual light," "an energy of the Superessential," at once transcending sense perception yet transforming it (Palamas 1983, III.ii.14). With the Virgin serving the primary example, Palamas proposes that "… anyone fortunate enough to attain to the divine energy, and to undergo divine transformation, himself becomes completely like the light, and by means of the light sees clearly things which, were it not for this great and inexpressible grace would be invisible to all … " (Palamas 2009, 442). The energy, the divine light, that - as exemplified in the Transfiguration - Christ possesses by nature communicates to composite human beings the possibility of deification by grace.

In a sermon dedicated to the dispensation accorded to the flesh for

those who believe in Christ, St. Gregory teaches that, to realise the new life God sought to bring to humankind, He could not be born in a natural way, i.e., "He could not have made His flesh an inexhaustible source of sanctification, with abundant power to wash away the defilement of our First Parents, and sufficient to sanctify everyone who came after Him" (Palamas 2009, 118). The hesychast life of prayer endeavours precisely to follow Christ in the hope of incorruptible life, moreover the hope of Christians *tout court*. But, in consonance with St. Gregory's understanding of the Virgin's example for the monks on Mount Athos, the specific intention of hesychast spirituality is to direct our mind and will to the Kingdom within, i.e., the incorporeal circumscribed in the body with the power to penetrate and organise matter. It is, after all, living matter, and, on that basis, can acquire, with the "visitation of divine grace" and the intercession of the *Theotokos*, a form of life capable of union with Christ.

The Mother of God represents a singular exemplification of *capax Dei.* Yet the effects of the Incarnation made possible through her consent are transubstantiating, as Palamas's homily "On the Holy and Dread Mysteries of Christ," suggests. Sharing the same flesh and blood with us, becoming like us, He is our Brother and Redeemer. But the full benefit will come in the Eucharistic participation in His body and blood and our transformation not only in terms of being in God's image, but – in accordance with His invitation – in the clothing of us in Him, the King and God of heaven, thus being transformed into a delightful dwelling place for the sublime Trinity. Our body becomes His Body, our potential, that power that comes to us through participating in the sacramental life of the Church, effectively His Body and figured in the Mother of God. Grace can transport us into a shared corporality in and with the Body of Christ, our divine affiliation restored and assured, ultimately deified. Or otherwise expressed and in accordance with the terms implied in Spinoza's question, the body *has* – like the body of the *Theotokos* containing the uncontainable – differentiable quantities of divine grace that distinguishes it from other existent beings and prepares it for the freedom of the sons of God. It underscores the possibility of self-transcending life, sustained by the co-inherence of the life of the uncreated and that of the created – or even the transforming of the created energies into the uncreated by grace.

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